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South China Sea: Watch Out, Dragon Could Bite!

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7/24/2016



China is fuming. It has obviously had enough, it is reaching the limit. For decades it tried to appease the West, to play by international laws, to be a good and responsible member of the international community. And for decades it never interfered in the internal affairs of other countries, it sponsored no coups and attacked no foreign lands.

Even its counter-propaganda has been measured, polite and mild.

All this has gained China no admiration, not even respect!

It is being constantly antagonized, provoked and encircled both militarily and ideologically. Not far from its territory are deadly US military bases (Futenma and Kadena) located on Okinawa, there are enormous bases on the Korean Peninsula and increasing US military presence in Southeast Asia, particularly in the Philippines. There are constant exercises and naval maneuvers near its shores and just recently, a decision by South Korea (ROK), to allow the US to deploy an advanced missile defense system (THAAD) in Seongju County.

In Nagasaki, my friend, an Australian historian Geoffrey Gunn commented on the situation:

“Well, the fact of the matter is that China is indignant at this encirclement. China is indignant that Washington backs Japan, that Washington is ready to support Japan’s non-negotiation policy over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. So we see, in this situation, a clearly indignant China, and Japan that is taking a basically aggressive position in relation to so-called territorial integrity. So Pacific Asia is increasingly becoming more belligerent, more conflict-prone East Asia.”

The propaganda against China in both Europe and North America is reaching a crescendo. The more socialist (Chinese way) it is once again becoming, and the closer its ties with Russia become, the more powerful the ideological attacks are from Western governments and mainstream media.

The latest decision (over the South China Sea dispute) of the ‘kangaroo’ arbitration court in The Hague appears to be the last drop.

The Chinese Dragon has risen in anger. Tired of receiving punches, mighty and strong, it has sent a strong message to the West: China is an enormous and peaceful country. But if threatened, if attacked, this time the country will be firm and determined. It will defend itself and its interests.

Just around the time when the court in The Hague was getting ready to rule, I was driving south from the Russian Far Eastern city of Khabarovsk, straight towards the border with China.

Flowing below us was the mighty River Ussuri, which separates two great nations, China and Russia. The modern bridge we were driving on was brand new; it had not even made it onto Google Maps, yet. Now it connects the Russian mainland with the Big Ussuri Island, a substantial land mass hugged from one side by the Amur and from the other by the Ussuri rivers.

In the past, this area used to suffer from great tensions and lived through several conflicts. The island was clearly a ‘disputed territory’, a ‘no go’ area, a military zone.

Still remembering the past, I came armed with my passport and several press cards, but my driver, Nikolai, was poking fun at my precautions.

“It is absolutely peaceful and quiet here now,” he said. “Now Russia and China are great friends and allies. Look there, on the shore, people are just parking their cars and having picnic.”

True, but all around I saw the remnants of the past – abandoned bunkers, as well as military ghost towns and constant warning signs announcing that we are entering a restricted border area. Not far away, I spotted a tall Chinese pagoda. We were really at the frontier.

A man was riding his horse, and close to the road, I spotted a collective farm.

I still couldn't believe that I was here, in this twilight zone. It all felt like watching an old film by Andrei Tarkovski.

But for the local people, all is ‘quite and normal’, now. Chinese and Russian people are mingling, getting to know and understand each other; tourists and bargain hunters travel by ferries, buses and airplanes, crossing the border in great numbers. The Vladivostok and Khabarovsk museums, concert halls and shopping centers are now overflowing with curious Chinese visitors.

The conflict is over. Vladimir Putin and Hu Jintao met in 2004, both leaders harboring clear and good intentions. Negotiations were complex but both sides overcame the obstacles. They signed an addendum to the Agreement on the Russian-Chinese state border, and all difficult disputes were resolved, rapidly.

Now China is investing tens of billions of dollars in the flourishing Russian Far East. Great infrastructural projects are materializing. A Solid friendship has been forged. The anti-imperialist alliance is in place. Both countries – China and Russia – are on the rise; both are full of optimism and hopes for the future.

‘It can be done’, I am thinking, after speaking to several local people who express their admiration for neighboring China. ‘It definitely can be done, if there is a strong will!’

A few thousand kilometers south, I drove through the horrific slums encircling Manila, the capital city of the Philippines.

Like Indonesia, the Philippines is clearly a ‘failed’ state, but both countries are known to be staunch allies of the West and therefore, their elites are continuously reaping rewards for their submissiveness and servility. To provoke and to antagonize China is one of the most secure ways to prove allegiance to Washington and to the European capitals.

As early as in 2012, I first decided to write about the ‘confrontation’ over the Spratly Islands for the People's Daily (one of the most important newspapers in China and the official publication of the Communist Party). I spoke to several of my friends – leading Filipino academics. One of them, Roland G. Simbulan, Senior Fellow and Professor in Development Studies and Public Management at the University of the Philippines, spoke to me about the ‘dispute’, as we were driving through Metro Manila, at the time searching for the remnants of the horrid US colonial rule over the archipelago, for my documentary film:

“Frankly speaking, those Spratly Islands are not so significant to us. What’s happening is that our political elites are clearly encouraged by the US to provoke China, and there is also the big influence of the US military on our armed forces. I would say that the Philippine military is very vulnerable to such type of ‘encouragement’. So the US is constantly nurturing those confrontational attitudes. But to continue with this type of approach could be disastrous for our country. Essentially we are very close to China, geographically and otherwise.”

“China has a stronger claim than Philippines,” explained Professor Eduardo C. Tadem, Professor of Asian Studies at the University of Philippines (UP), two years later, in his home:

“China controlled the Spratly Islands before we even knew anything about them. The only claim we have is their proximity, and frankly, that is not a particularly strong claim.”

Both Eduard Tadem and his wife Teresa S. Encarnation Tadem (Professor at the Department of Political Science College of Science and Philosophy at University of the Philippines and also the former head of ‘Third World Studies’ at UP), agree that the West is continuously provoking China while trying to ensure that the natural resources of the Spratly Islands goes to the weakest players:

“We are totally dependent on foreign companies for the exploitation of our natural resources. The Philippines only gets a share from what is extracted. The international companies hold all the major contracts. Foreign multi-nationals would greatly profit from the natural resources of the China Sea, if a weak and dependent country like this one were to be put in charge of them.”

In China, passions exploded right in July 2016, right after the final decision came from The Hague. As reported by Reuters on 18th July 2016:

“China has refused to recognise the ruling by an arbitration court in The Hague that invalidated its vast territorial claims in the South China Sea and did not take part in the proceedings brought by the Philippines.

It has reacted angrily to calls by Western countries and Japan for the decision to be adhered to.

China has repeatedly blamed the United States for stirring up trouble in the South China Sea, a strategic waterway through which more than \$5 trillion of trade moves annually.

China, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam all have rival claims, of which China’s is the largest.”

A researcher of US studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences made this correct observation: “We can see that Washington, which has never ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, encouraged and supported Manila to initiate the arbitration case from the very beginning.”

Many observers, in Beijing and abroad, pointed out that the ruling was clearly political, and that out of five, four judges were citizens of the EU, while one (the chairman) was Ghanaian but also a long-term resident of Europe.

The Chinese response was quick and determined. The official newspaper, “China Daily”, declared on July 15th: “Beijing said on Thursday that it will respond resolutely if any party seeks to use the ruling in the unilaterally initiated arbitration on the South China Sea to harm China’s interests.”

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The position of China is clear: it is bound by several bilateral agreements with its neighbors, and it is willing to negotiate further. But not through the West and its institutions that are hostile towards China and towards all countries that are not ready to accept Western dictates.

During a recent meeting in the Mongolian capital Ulaanbaatar, Vietnam’s Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc met China’s Premier Li Keqiang and declared that “Vietnam stands ready to push for forward bilateral negotiations and properly manage differences with China, in order to contribute to regional peace and stability.” Such approach is welcomed and encouraged by Beijing.

Even in Manila, there are countless voices of reason emerging, calling for further and immediate bilateral negotiations with China.

To antagonize China is not only wrong; it is dangerous and shortsighted. Beijing has been backing up and compromising too long, for many decades. It will not any longer. Chinese people demand fairness. The Philippines should realize that the West is using their country as a proxy, for its imperialist goals.

To involve Western courts in internal Asian disputes, as is being done by the Philippines, will only aggravate the situation. To shoot at Chinese fishing vessels in the disputed waters (as was recently done by the Indonesian navy) can only escalate tensions (Indonesia already has a horrid historic track record in relation to China – banning the Chinese language, culture and even names, for decades, after the bloody Western-backed coup of 1965).

For the time being, China will be applying a ‘wait and see’ strategy. Once again, it will use its diplomacy, re-launching bilateral negotiations with the Philippines, Vietnam and other countries.

But if the West refuses to back up, and if some of the Southeast Asian countries continue to act as proxies for the West, Beijing would most likely use one of the tougher options. One would be setting up an air defense identification zone over the South China Sea. Another would be direct military escalation – greater naval and air force presence in the area.

And what is the position of the world? No matter what the Western propaganda is trumpeting, only a handful countries, mainly the US and its closest allies (5 at the time this essay is being written), have publicly supported the Philippines and the Ruling coming from The Hague. Over

70 nations support China and its belief that disputes should be resolved through negotiations and not arbitration. The rest of the world has remained 'neutral'.

It is possible to negotiate a good deal with China. But one has to approach Chinese Dragon as a friend, never as a foe. And the hand of peace has to be honestly extended. It should never be hiding the sword of Western imperialism behind the back!